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### From the taxi drivers' rear-view mirror

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**From the taxi drivers' rear-view mirror: masculinity, marginality and sexual violence in India's capital city**

(Special Issue, (En)countering Sexual Violence in the Indian City)

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# **From the taxi drivers' rear-view mirror: masculinity, marginality and sexual violence in India's capital city**

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## **Abstract**

The Delhi Gang Rape and other public sexual violence cases have led Delhi to acquire the dubious distinction of being called India's 'rape capital'. This has been accompanied by an outcry for guaranteeing 'women's safety' in the city. The growing incidence of violence against women in urban India, more generally, is said to point to a crisis of masculinity, where the confidence shown by women entering higher education, the workplace and the public arena seems to trigger insecurity among men who are used to being in charge. Political leaders and the media have repeatedly portrayed low-income male migrants as being responsible for such violence. How do working-class migrant men construct their own masculinity, and perceive of women's access to public spaces? To answer this question, this article explores the narratives of twelve working-class migrant men, all of whom are associated with a kin-based taxi stand in affluent South Delhi. The narratives are based on interviews, group discussions and participant observation conducted primarily in 2013.

**Keywords:** Delhi; marginality; masculinities; migrants; spaces; violence

High-profile public sexual violence cases in Delhi coming to the fore – from the brutal gang-rape of a young woman in a moving bus in December 2012, known as the Delhi Gang Rape, to more recent rapes by smart application-based taxi companies' drivers – has resulted in the

city acquiring the dubious title of India's 'rape capital' (Alavi 2017; Punit 2018). This has led to claims that a 'crisis of masculinity' is to blame for the violence (Kapur 2012; Swami 2013). That the Delhi Gang Rape perpetrators were working-class men, like the drivers involved in the Ola and Uber cases, has meant that low-income men, especially rural-to-urban migrants, have come under the scanner in the city. This article explores how these men – represented by the media and political elite as the demographic responsible for public sexual violence against women<sup>1</sup>, and therefore at the centre of the 'crisis of masculinity' – construct their own masculinity, and perceive of women's access to public spaces. The article aims to question the essentialised image of violent working-class migrant masculinity by paying attention to the contexts of marginalisation that neoliberal urban processes in India today produce and in which these men find themselves. It is based on findings from a study on Delhi's taxi drivers, a significant proportion of whom *are* rural-to-urban migrant men.

### **Working-class masculinity, violence and neoliberal urban transformation – a conceptual canvas**

To theoretically frame my study, I draw on Western and Indian scholarship on masculinity and sexual violence, on gender and space, and on working-class masculinity and auto-mobility. I take cue from Connell (1995), Srivastava (2014) and Kimmel's (1994) understandings of masculinity, underlying which is a notion of gender performativity. For Connell, masculinity is 'simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place... and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture' (1995: 71). Srivastava (2014) argues that 'hegemonic masculine identity' is the form of masculinity that is considered dominant in a given setting,

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. 'PM warns of "footloose migrants" from rural areas', *Hindustan Times*, 27 December 2012, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/pm-warns-of-footloose-migrants-from-rural-areas/story-4jflwCxvoxmu1RRljNULjN.html>

and is produced in relation to femininity as well as those ways of being male that deviate from the norm. Focusing on the latter, Kimmel (1994) refers as ‘homo-social enactment’ men demonstrating their conformity to what is considered ‘manly’, their watching and ranking other men’s performance of masculinity, and their seeking approval from other men ‘as men’.

The construction of masculine identity takes place in multiple sites. Scholarship on gender and space (Fenster 2005; Phadke 2013) sheds light on how gendered access to spaces is central to dominant understandings of masculinity; simply put, public space is considered a male domain and private space is where women are said to belong (Fenster 2005). Public space, given its openness to ‘strangers’, is perceived as being dangerous for women, where the latter are vulnerable to sexual violence (Phadke 2013). Significant in this regard is the discourse of ‘masculinist protectionism’ wherein men are cast as women’s protectors: they must shield women from the dangers lurking in public space (Young 2003).

Kimmel (1996) argues that a ‘crisis of masculinity’ arises when large-scale socio-economic changes shake up such dominant understandings of masculinity. Indian family life contains ‘elaborate formal and informal means of reinforcing and celebrating [heteronormative] male privilege’ – sons are brought up to ‘both perpetuate and condone gender hierarchies and are nurtured with a sense of entitlement’ (Srivastava 2013). Butalia (2012) and Kapur (2012) argue that increasing numbers of women entering the public arena to pursue higher education and to join the workforce in post-liberalisation India have threatened this sense of entitlement, bringing on the ‘crisis of masculinity’. According to them, high-profile rape cases are a manifestation of this crisis, and need to be located in a continuum of sexual and gender-based violence, ranging from threat of coercion to rape in the home, workplace and elsewhere.

Phadke (2013) draws attention to how this crisis has been framed: pitting working-class migrant men against the newly empowered middle-class women. The latter are regarded

as symbolising both national honour and urban modernity. In aspiring global cities like Mumbai and Delhi, working-class migrant men are being characterised as dangerous ‘unfriendly bodies’, posing a risk to not only middle-class women’s safety but also to these cities’ claim to global status. She argues that this characterisation has been long in the making. The same men were treated as ‘lost causes’ and as barriers to progress in the development discourses of the planning era in India.

In this article, I critically examine the processes through which a set of working-class migrant men ‘become’ men, their repertoire of everyday bodily routines, their interaction with other men and women, and their perceptions about sexual violence, public spaces and their own position in the city to unpack how they experience the ‘crisis of masculinity’ in post-liberalisation India. Useful in this examination is the scholarship focused on working-class masculinity (Cohen 2005; Jeffrey 2010; Nixon 2009; Osella and Osella 2006; Rogers 2008). Successful working-class masculinity has been traditionally performed by engaging in breadwinning through paid work in male-dominated sectors outside the home, and has been known by such occupational characteristics as manual and technical skills, and independence and resistance to authorities (Jeffrey 2010; Nixon 2009). The act of migrating to earn a livelihood where necessary is said to conform to these conventional notions of successful working-class masculinity (Cohen 2005).

Given that the working-class migrant men I focus on are taxi drivers, I engage with some scholarship on automobility (Bedi 2016a and 2016b; Choi 2018; Jain 2005; Urry 2007) to make sense of the connections between working-class masculinity, public transport, rural-to-urban male migration, spatiality and neoliberal urban transformation. On the links between automobility and masculinity, scholars like Jain (2005) and Urry (2007) argue that the driver’s seat is seen as (re)asserting the male as the family head in control of its destiny. Whilst neither Choi’s work on rural-to-urban male migrant taxi drivers in China’s

metropolitan cities nor Bedi's (2016a; 2016b) ethnography of Mumbai's taxi trade explicitly engages with working-class masculinities, I draw on their work for valuable insights on how taxi modernisation is considered integral to neoliberal urban transformation for building 'world-class' cities and affects taxi drivers' identity and everyday life.

### **Research strategy**

Findings are based on data collected by myself and my research assistant through in-depth interviews and group discussions in Hindi, lasting 1-3 hours, with 12 rural-to-urban male migrant drivers associated with a single taxi stand. Often what began as an interview with one driver at the stand turned into a discussion with other drivers joining in. I also conducted participant observations there and rode along with some drivers. This data was gathered primarily in 2013 with follow-up visits in 2014 and 2016. To initiate the interview, I would ask the drivers to reflect on what they noticed 'from their taxi's rear-view mirror' – about their passengers, the city, etc. and how they thought these had changed over the years. The article derives its title from this prompt.

The interviews and discussions focused on the drivers' aspirations – past and present, their work life, and their perceptions about Delhi. Whilst sexual violence too was a key theme, I chose to not make this explicit given my apprehension about how comfortable they would be to talk about it with me – a point I shall return to. All interviews and discussions were digitally recorded and transcribed with informed consent. Narratives were prepared combining transcriptions with the notes I took. Using narrative analysis was a conscious choice as the method conveys the narrators' lived experiences in their depth and messiness by using the actual words spoken (Clandinin and Rosiek 2007). The drivers' names were changed, and the names of the stand and the campus on whose edge it is located were omitted to ensure anonymity.

Of the twelve taxi drivers, nine were Punjabi Sikhs, the remaining were middle-caste Hindus from Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Whilst the Punjabi Sikhs had arrived in the 1980s and 1990s, the others were recent migrants. They were all semi-skilled poor, often migrating alone from rural areas in search of jobs in Delhi's informal sector. While the oldest one was 62 and the youngest 23, the majority were in their thirties and forties in 2013. Most were married and living away from their family. The 10×15 metres stand, where they lived, was surrounded by a campus, a middle-class housing colony, urban villages, and a private school. The drivers' passengers were mostly middle-class, residing either on campus or in the housing colony.

I went into the field – as an upper-caste, middle-class, urban, educated, married woman in my thirties, employed at a British university – to research the lived experiences of these working-class rural-to-urban migrant men, many of whom I had known as their regular passenger, having grown up on the campus. Whilst my familiarity with them meant that I could easily gain access, I was aware of the likely limitations of my gender and class background. During fieldwork in 2013, I engaged a male research assistant – a former student of mine from a local university – to address some of these limitations. He was particularly successful in getting the younger drivers to individually open up to him about homo-sociality at the stand. Interestingly though the difference in the drivers' and my class and gender backgrounds coupled with our familiarity with each other led us to converse at length about '*ladies* passengers' like myself, and about the drivers' struggle to cope with the changing public perceptions about 'taxi drivers' after the recent rapes in the city. Overall, what I discuss in this article emerges from our co-production of a distinct material and epistemic field, inhabited by our inequities of class and gender-based power (Lohokare 2016).

### **Narratives of masculinity, marginality and violence**



This analysis section is divided into two parts. Taking cue from Srivastava (2014), who argues that the most honoured way of being a man in a given setting is produced in relation to other men as well as women, the first part engages with the drivers' narratives that shed light on how their masculinity was produced in relation to other men in their village, family, stand, taxis and on the road. The second part engages with those narratives which reveal how they performed their masculinity in relation to women who travel in their taxis and in local buses. In these narratives, the drivers reflect on different kinds of '*ladies* passengers', why young, middle-class women are increasingly at the receiving end of public sexual violence, and how they see themselves as these women's protectors on Delhi's roads.

### ***'Becoming a man'/ driving, migration and respectability***

Delhi's taxi trade, quite like Mumbai's (Bedi 2016a), was historically structured around kin groups. In the eighties when the stand was set up, whenever one hailed a taxi in Delhi, the driver was almost always a Punjabi Sikh man. Most taxi drivers part of my study came from a long lineage of drivers and social circuits that emerged around motoring among rural-to-urban male migrant Sikhs from Punjab's Mohali region. They hailed from landless labouring families who had not benefitted from the Green Revolution. Excerpts from 52 year-old Balwant Singh's and 35 year-old Satnam Singh's recollections of how and why they migrated to Delhi as taxi drivers reveal that, in a context where the middle-class, male, Jat, landholding farmer was the dominant masculine ideal to which rural Punjabi men aspired (Chopra 2004), male Sikh taxi drivers were creating an alternative discourse of respectable, even if not dominant, masculinity, which hinged on their association with automobility and rural-to-urban migration to Delhi:

‘In those days, the means of transport were limited, and one rarely got to see a motor vehicle (*gādī*) in the village. So he who drove a vehicle was considered a big man (*badā ādmī*).’

‘When daddy would bring the taxi on his visits home, I would think to myself: I will go to Delhi and drive one day... In the driving profession (*gādī kī naukri*), you learnt a technical skill, earned good money, and could take leave when you wanted, work when you wanted. My father owned 4-5 vehicles. That can seem like a lot for a young lad. The first time I came to Delhi was under the pretext of visiting my father at the stand. After arriving, I told him that I too would drive a motor vehicle in Delhi (*Dillī mē gādī chalāungā*). Delhi is a big city. It has a big name in the village. That’s how I stayed on and became a driver.’

The drivers’ creation of this alternative discourse of ‘respectable’ working-class masculinity strongly resonates with scholarship on what constitutes successful working-class migrant masculinity as discussed at the outset (Cohen 2005; Jeffrey 2010; Nixon 2009). Motor vehicles’ use and ownership as signifying the production of this masculinity, as highlighted in Balwant Singh’s narrative excerpt, is in fact a recurring theme in scholarship on automobility and masculinity (Jain 2005; Urry 2007). Satnam Singh’s observations indicate how migrating *as a driver* gave him ‘freedom’ and ‘control’ all at once, that is, ‘being on the move’ while ‘being his own boss’ – attributes which male migrant drivers elsewhere in the world too proudly associate with their job (Choi 2018).

The drivers’ construction of this respectable working-class migrant masculinity was framed in relation to not only other men in their village who were engaged in farming but also those in their own families. In Satnam Singh’s case, the decision to *migrate as a driver to Delhi* was shaped by the example of his own father who had already migrated and secured employment in the city’s taxi trade. For the Punjabi Sikh taxi drivers at the stand, just as for

thousands of others migrating each year<sup>2</sup>, Delhi was not just any city: it was the ‘big city’ and held the promise of their becoming a ‘big man’.

At the stand, there was a clear hierarchy: at the top were three Punjabi Sikh men in their mid-thirties, who had inherited the stand’s ownership from their fathers, and who now jointly ran its day-to-day affairs. They owned private cars and metered taxis. Below them were other Punjabi Sikh men, who owned and drove metered taxis, and then there were those who drove the three stand owners’ private cars. At the bottom were the ‘helpers’/ apprentices, who neither owned nor drove a vehicle yet. Hierarchy of this kind produced its own versions of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities, where the hegemonic masculine ideal was embodied by those who owned and ran taxis and the stand itself. The owners-cum-drivers compelled apprentices to inhabit a subordinate masculine role while the apprentices themselves strove to transcend it as the following quote from 35-year old Kishan Lal from Himachal Pradesh demonstrates:

‘If you want to learn the vehicle (*gādī sīkhnā*) from someone, you will have to address them as sir (*jī*). You will have to wash their vehicle, their clothes. You will have to make them tea. You will have to bring them cigarettes and liquor. Only after you have given them every type of service (*har tarah kī sēvā*) will they give you their vehicle to drive. So one has to proceed with the knowledge that there will be difficulties.’

Even in the all-male space of the stand, the drivers’ notions of hegemonic masculine ideals were produced on the one hand in contradistinction with what is typically associated with ‘feminine’ tasks and behaviour in hetero-patriarchal contexts, like preparing tea or washing clothes, and on the other hand through a kind of homo-sociality, which valued willingness and ability to bear hardship. The latter is particularly borne out by the fact that they all slept in a single tent and were at the mercy of the harsh Delhi weather, with the

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<sup>2</sup> Delhi receives the largest flow of migrants anywhere in India (IIHS 2011).

summer temperature reaching 50 degrees Celsius, the monsoons bringing mosquitoes and water-borne diseases, and the winter chill cutting to the bones. Water supply was limited, and sanitation was practically non-existent: the illegally constructed makeshift bathroom and toilet, each of which barely covered half of the body of a man of average height, were routinely torn down by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi.

Whilst these rural-to-urban migrant drivers clearly lacked the resources to live up to the urban hegemonic masculine ideal, valuing entrepreneurship, wealth, educational credentials and professional occupational status (Choi 2018), they had managed to produce an alternative version of ‘respectable’ working-class migrant masculinity. As described above, this involved undergoing an arduous process of learning to cope with difficult living and working conditions. It also included either saving enough or having one’s family members pool in money to purchase a taxi. For many of them, setting up their own stand was an aspiration and an important signifier of successful masculinity.

But since the early 2000s, taxi modernisation, integral to neoliberal urban transformation for creating ‘world-class cities’, has been aggressively afoot, involving phasing out kin-based, neighbourhood taxi stands in favour of app-based companies like Uber and Ola (Bedi 2016a; IANS 2016). As a result, the working-class migrant Sikh taxi drivers whom I interviewed are experiencing marginalisation in a trade they had once dominated. Whilst I shall discuss later how these drivers insist on distinguishing themselves from app-based taxi companies’ drivers, especially on the issue of female passengers’ sexual harassment, I focus here on how they consider that with the latter flooding the trade, all taxi drivers’ professional status has fallen, exposing them to greater exploitation.<sup>3</sup> The following quote from 25 year-old Hem Raj from Himachal Pradesh illustrates how this has resulted in

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<sup>3</sup> On app-based taxi companies’ drivers’ struggles, see Sushma, U.N. (2018) ‘They were sold a fantasy of middle-class life. Now Ola and Uber drivers face a brutal reality’, March 19, <https://qz.com/india/1230993/the-reality-of-driving-for-ola-and-uber-in-india-debt-slashed-pay-multiple-jobs/>

disillusionment with the job that had brought drivers like him to Delhi and had been crucial to their sense of being men:

Being a driver in Delhi is a bad idea. Earlier, there used to be two sirs (*sāhib*): *driver*<sup>4</sup> and *master* (teacher). But now people think that if they've *hired* a *driver*, they have... purchased him. People look at the *driver* like he is some dog (*kuttā*).

Studies on taxi drivers in other post-liberalisation contexts too have echoed Hem Raj's observation that passengers increasingly seemed to consider that 'they were buying not just a ride, but good service' (Choi 2018: 502).

According to 35 year-old Punjabi Sikh, Harjot Singh, the fact that a series of 'scandals' involving drivers had come to light in recent years had aggravated the already worsening image and condition of Delhi's taxi drivers:

'Once upon a time, *drivers* got a lot of respect (*izzat*). Driving was considered a very good job (*bahut badhiyā kām*). But then there was the *AIDS* scandal. The *truck drivers* were the ones who were affected. There might have been only one *taxi driver* among a 100 *drivers* who would have got it. But it ruined our *image*.... And now this *bus* scandal (read: Delhi Gang Rape) has happened... There are also stories of Ola and Uber *drivers* misbehaving with women passengers. All this has made us completely infamous (*badnām*). Today, no one is willing to give their daughter in marriage to a *driver* as they once did, irrespective of which vehicle he drives. These scandals have ruined the *image* of *all drivers*, be it that of a *truck driver*, *bus driver* or *taxi driver*.'

Harjot Singh refers to how the taxi drivers' image had suffered a hit with the moral panic surrounding AIDS. In 2014, 2.5 million people were estimated to be living with HIV-AIDS in India (World Bank 2015). Truck drivers are said to be the largest virus carriers, and have

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<sup>4</sup> The italicised English words in the drivers' quotes/ conversational excerpts are those that they themselves employed.

been socially stigmatised as such (McDougall 2005). Being identified as belonging to loosely the same profession, taxi drivers too have not escaped such stigmatisation. The Delhi Gang Rape and the subsequent Ola and Uber sexual harassment cases have exacerbated this image.

Hem Raj's and Harjot Singh's narrative excerpts also allude to how the male migrant taxi driver is no longer a 'big' man, and that the discourse of respectable working-class masculinity that drivers like themselves have sought to construct is increasingly untenable. Even after enduring difficult working conditions and living away from their families, the older, married taxi drivers are struggling to provide for their families back in the village. In the hetero-patriarchal Indian society, getting married is in itself a complex and gendered project, and unlike in the 1980s and 1990s, the younger, single drivers today find they are in a losing battle to prove themselves as deserving grooms.

### ***'Ladies passengers'/ gender, sexuality and public space***

The taxi drivers' sense of masculinity is shaped by their interactions with not only other men, as discussed above, but also women. Majority of the drivers live away from their families, and whilst a few have formed new relationships in the city, for most, their primary interaction with women takes place in their taxis and in local buses. Narratives in this section explore how the drivers' construction of a respectable working-class migrant masculinity is closely linked to the production and perpetuation of a discourse of 'masculinist protectionism'.

Young writes:

'The "good" man is one who keeps vigilant watch over the safety of his family and readily risks himself in the face of threats from outside... The logic of masculinist protection, then, includes the image of the selfish aggressor... These are the bad men. Good men can only appear in their goodness if we assume that lurking outside the warm familial walls are aggressors who wish to attack them' (2003: 3-4).

The taxi drivers I interacted with saw themselves in the protector's role vis-à-vis their women passengers. To quote 23 year-old Punjabi Sikh, Preetam Singh,

‘As long as the *ladies passenger* is in the vehicle, her security (*surakshā*) is our responsibility (*zimmēdārī*), our duty. Sometimes, other vehicle drivers peek in to see who our passenger is. Then we have to see if there is a need to overtake them.’

The drivers also portrayed themselves as protecting women *on behalf* of men otherwise expected to dispense that duty, as Satnam Singh's quote below illustrates:

‘Many times, the men of the house (*gharwālē*) send ladies and children putting their trust (*bharosā*) in us... Unlike Uber and Ola *drivers*, we are known to them. The *stand* is known to them.’

Preetam Singh and Satnam Singh's narrative excerpts reveal how the drivers employed their association with a kin-based, neighbourhood taxi stand to characterise themselves as ‘good’ and ‘respectable’ men in contradistinction from other, unknown, untrustworthy men like those peeking into their taxis and catcalling female passengers as well as those who drive app-based taxis, making a sly reference here to the negative reports about the latter's involvement in recent sexual harassment cases in the city. It could be argued that in a hetero-patriarchal context where public space is said to be produced through anonymous encounters with strangers and private space through more familial intimate connections (Young 2003), the drivers portrayed their taxis as offering liminal, partially private ‘public spaces’, and in that sense, ‘safe’ for women passengers.

However, behind the drivers' aforementioned remarks lay certain unsaid ideas. First, they seemed to assume private space as being one where women would be safe from the threat of sexual violence. Whilst I did not address this directly with them, there is considerable research (Phadke 2007; Viswanath and Mehrotra 2007) pointing to how the private space of the home is far from ‘safe’. Second, a complex politics of class and

respectability underlies their notions about '*ladies* passengers' as well as the catcalling peeping toms and Uber and Ola drivers.

To unpack this politics, I quizzed the drivers about the kinds of women passengers they transported. This shed light on their notions about 'good' and 'bad' women, which in turn were tied to 'right' and 'wrong' places. Their observations reproduced age-old hetero-patriarchal ideas about the epitome of the 'bad' woman being the one selling sex and the place where it is sold as being a 'wrong' place (Phadke, Ranade and Khan 2009) as the following conversation illustrates:

Joga Singh: Madam, the thing with *ladies* is that we can tell from their face. Mostly, they are good. Only a few are not...

Kuldeep Singh: Just the way the CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation) can recognise in a minute...

Balwant Singh: We can even tell where they'll want to go, and whether that place is good or not.... the *ladies* passenger who comes after 11pm usually wants to go to inappropriate (*aisī-waisī*) places.

Myself: What do you see in a face to be able to tell?

Balwant Singh: The woman who wants to go to a wrong place will have done a different type of *make-up*, one that men would find *attractive*.

Myself: Where do these women come from?

Balwant Singh: Russia, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan... They [go] here and there at night.

Kuldeep Singh: Sometimes, to bars, at other times, to five star hotels, farmhouses...

Balwant Singh: In *multipolitan* (read: metropolitan) *cities*, there's a very big network behind these women.



Joga Singh: If they say they want to go to Khirki at night. Say, a Black (*habshī*) woman turns up. We immediately say ‘no’. If they say, ‘Take us to the back of Seelampur or Madangir’, again, we say ‘no’.

Balwant Singh: But sometimes we have to acquiesce. We feel afraid... If she’s a *foreigner*, we feel more afraid. If we say ‘no’, she can... allege we’re harassing her.

The police will come and catch us, never mind that she’s the one indulging in wrong. The drivers’ references to women selling sex in ‘*multipolitan*’ landscapes unravel everyday realities of the ‘diverse embodied and sexualised economies characteristic of world cities’ (Hubbard 2011). Let me explain. The Indian state’s policies on liberalising trade and tourism and to cast metropolises in the ‘global city’ mould incidentally also established migratory pathways for sex workers from Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Africa. Scholars have identified this phenomenon of transnational migrant sex workers as ‘transnationalism from below’ (Hoang 2010). The drivers’ observations point to how, in the emergent world-class city of Delhi, there is a racialized-ethnicised hierarchy among women sex workers and the spaces they occupy, premised on intersections of nationality, physiogamy and tier of sex work. There are higher- and lower-class sex workers, borne out by the places from which they operate (Bernstein 2007).

Sex workers from Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States, with Caucasian-like features, are at the top of the hierarchy, operating as escorts in five-star hotels, bar-restaurants and farmhouses (Pandey 2002). Those from African countries like Nigeria, Kenya and Ghana are considered ‘downmarket’. The drivers mentioned Khirki Extension, an unauthorised colony around South Delhi’s Khirki urban village, as being a ‘wrong’ place, harbouring African sex workers. The place is locally known as Little Africa, and these

African sex workers, and in fact all black people of African descent, are referred to as '*habshī*'.<sup>5</sup> These women can be seen soliciting sex on street corners and parking lots of shopping malls, of the kind near Khirki Extension. Successively lower in the hierarchy are rural-to-urban migrant and local women, operating from their homes in more far-flung urban villages like Seelampur and Madangir. At the very bottom are those in Delhi's red light district, the notorious G.B. Road brothels, which the drivers failed to mention. Sex workers from there are unlikely to be found in the drivers' taxis given their association with a stand in an affluent neighbourhood.

The drivers' articulations further confirm what Phadke (2007) writes about the expectation that women stake a claim for safety in public space by producing 'respectability' and demonstrating 'protection-worthiness' by acts such as wearing modest attire, avoiding late night outings, and being accompanied by 'protective' men – none of which the sex workers did. The drivers' reluctance to transport these women indicates that they do not consider the women protection-worthy. In fact, the drivers believe that these women make *them* 'weak and vulnerable'. Several of these women enter the country on tourist or student visas (Times of India, 2012) – this means that unless caught in the act of publicly soliciting sex, their nationality affords them legal protection.<sup>6</sup> At the time of fieldwork, the media had been abuzz with reports of raids on sly prostitution sites and on-street sex workers' arrests, whose underlying aim was to 'cleanse' India's emergent world-class cities (Phadke 2007). Led by former Delhi Law Minister, Somnath Bharti, during Aam Admi Party's rule in January 2014, the most prominent of these raids was one in Khirki Extension.

The drivers' fear and suspicion of sex workers, and their remarks that the police personnel would take the foreign sex workers' word because of their nationality need to be

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<sup>5</sup> '*Habshī*' is an Arabic term used to refer to Abyssinian and African slaves in pre-British India. In the contemporary Indian context, it is the derogatory equivalent of 'nigger' or 'negro' (Suraiya 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Under the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (1988) provisions, sex work is not illegal but sex-workers are prohibited from publicly soliciting and must confine themselves to specific areas.

understood in the above context. Were the drivers to get caught transporting sex workers, their subordinate masculine place in the city as low-income, internal migrant workers would afford them no protection. Recall the sexual scandals that they claimed had ruined their reputation – association in any form with these ‘bad’ women could jeopardise their construction of ‘respectable’ working-class migrant masculinity.

Although the drivers never specified as such, the ‘good’ women they considered worthy of ‘protection’ were all middle-class women. After all, these women constitute the majority of women living in the stand’s vicinity and can afford to travel by taxi. The drivers also did not specify that these women were upper-caste, Hindu, married or would-be-married, and assumed to be heterosexual. What the drivers claimed to have noticed was a marked change in the younger generation of these ‘good’ women, who they said could be seen everywhere in the city. Reflecting on middle-class women’s mobility in public space in post-liberalisation urban India, Phadke (2013) has observed how their ‘overt visibility’ makes their bodies a public canvas upon which the discourses of modernity, traditionalism, and respectable protection-worthiness are written. Narrative excerpts below evidence in different ways how the drivers perceive young middle-class women, increasingly assertive about their rights in public space, as perilously flirting on the edge of ‘respectability’. To quote Preetam Singh:

I am afraid of only one thing in this city: getting into a skirmish (*pangā*) with a girl.... If by chance you sit on a *ladies’ seat* in the *bus*, they’ll immediately say, ‘Get up, this is our *seat*.’ But if they sit on our seat... they’ll refuse to move... [They] say boys eve-tease (*chhēd-chhād*) them.... They easily complain to the police. They want to *highlight* themselves. That’s why they get their stories printed in the newspapers. That’s why, my friend, in Delhi, beware of girls’ bossiness (*dādāgirī*)!’

The scenario Preetam Singh describes is commonplace. Delhi's local buses earmark 6-8 seats for women; 'ladies' seats' in popular parlance. Though intended to facilitate safe and comfortable travel for women, and not limit their presence, if a woman sits on an unreserved seat she is likely to be told by men to move to a 'ladies' seat' (Dhanda 2008: 318). Further, Preetam Singh's anger and sense of being 'bossed around' too is unsurprising. It confirms Kapur (2012) and Srivastava's (2014) arguments about how Indian men, having been socialised into thinking that their masculine identity comes from occupying and dominating public spaces, find that women asserting themselves in these spaces, including seats on buses, challenges their sense of superiority and entitlement as men.

Research on Indian working-class men shows how their resentment and marginalisation can manifest in sexual harassment (Jeffrey 2010; Osella and Osella 2006; Rogers 2008). Rogers (2008) notes how male scheduled caste students in a Chennai college use 'eve-teasing' to contest their subordination. Preetam Singh's remarks about the women drawing media's attention as attempts to hog the limelight too need to be read in this context. They suggest that working-class men's negative portrayal in the media reportage on public sexual violence after the Delhi Gang Rape (Phadke 2013; Swami 2013) makes these drivers all the more resentful towards these women. They also display an uncanny resemblance to anti-feminist backlashers' remarks, accusing feminists of using the media to become famous (Chaudhuri 2000).

What is worse, given Uber and Ola drivers' involvement in the city's recent sexual harassment cases, the drivers feel that they are being suspected, by these women and state authorities like police personnel, for having become the 'selfish aggressors' from whom they seek to 'protect' the very same women. They may insist that their working at kin-based, neighbourhood taxi stands distinguishes them from other working-class migrant men in their own profession, namely app-based taxi drivers, completely unknown to the women

passengers. They may also declare that their taxis are partially private ‘public spaces’ offering ‘safety’. But they are well-aware that the notion of an alternative, ‘respectable’ working-class masculinity that they have sought to construct over the years is fast slipping away.

Even as the drivers see many of the young middle-class women challenging the ‘protectionist’ discourse by occupying public spaces, they continue to participate in ‘victim-blaming’, a crucial component of this discourse, inculcating the women for bringing sexual violence upon themselves (Phadke 2007). To quote 25 year-old Punjabi Sikh, Amandeep Singh: ‘Girls have started wearing clothes where everything is visible (*sab kuchh dikhtā hai*). Because of this, violence against them has gone up.’ For the drivers, these women seem to be a case of ‘good’ girls gone ‘bad’. The cultural and economic capital these women possess today – being more educated, engaged in gainful employment, and at the centre of the public discourse on women’s safety – makes the drivers acutely aware of their marginalised position as working-class migrant men in the city, a position which affords them no protection.

To quote Satnam Singh:

‘We have to be careful nowadays, lest the *ladies* passenger says, ‘The *driver* has been insolent with me.’ What if she tears her clothes and says that the *driver* has torn them?! She is the one who will be believed. No one will listen to us.’

Satnam Singh’s remarks unravel not only the threat they perceive from assertive middle-class women but also the anxiety and sense of exclusion caused by the way the public safety discourse constructs working-class migrant men. This discourse portrays them as posing risk to middle-class women wherein the latter’s visibility and guaranteed safety in ‘respectable’ public spaces is a signifier of the city’s claim to global status (Phadke 2013).

## Conclusion

This article has sought to provide context and contour to the otherwise essentialised image of violent working-class migrant masculinity in contemporary Indian metropolises, most notably Delhi, by bringing to the fore the city's male migrant taxi drivers' unheard narratives. The narratives shed light on the relevance and specificity of taxi driving as a livelihood and an avenue for constructing 'respectable' working-class masculinity, which hinges on the (re)production of homo-sociality and masculinist protectionism. The narratives also identify how the wider context of neoliberal urban transformation affects the drivers' everyday lives, threatening both their livelihood and this notion of 'respectable' working-class masculinity.

The narratives evidence how 'good' and 'bad' women and men and their access to public space are identified, considering class, caste, race, nationality, and cultural and economic capital in emergent Indian world-class cities. By capturing both the drivers' sense of vulnerability vis-à-vis newly empowered women in Delhi's public spaces and the drivers' anxiety in response to the public discourse characterising working-class migrant men as being responsible for increasing public sexual violence, the narratives draw attention to the importance of addressing the acute marginalisation and crisis of masculinity that these men are experiencing in post-liberalisation urban India. Simply pitting working-class migrant men against middle-class women in the public discourse on women's safety as the media and political elite have done will not resolve the problem of increasing public sexual violence in India's capital city. But it could aggravate it.

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